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Increasing Instability in North Yemen

Special National Intelligence Estimate

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INCREASING INSTABILITY IN NORTH YEMEN

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Also Participating:

The Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army

The Director of Naval Intelligence, Department of the Navy

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KEY JUDGMENTS

The steady deterioration of President Salih's position and the intensification of domestic unrest in North Yemen¹ are likely to persist. This prospect in itself does not pose significant direct threats to US interests in the region. However, it could set in motion events that would have an unsettling affect on Saudi Arabia's leaders, who are especially sensitive to developments in North Yemen. Thus, in the coming months the United States probably will be asked by the Saudis to help "manage" the North Yemen problem.

- The most dangerous near-term possibility, particularly from the Saudi viewpoint, is that President Salih will move more definitively toward the Soviet Union in an effort to induce Moscow to restrain the National Democratic Front—the leftist insurgency supported by Marxist South Yemen. Such a move might involve inclusion of Marxists in North Yemen's government and an increased Soviet presence in the country.
- A more likely possibility is that Salih will be deposed within the year by disgruntled elements in the military or by some combination of military, tribal, and political figures.
- In either instance, there is a chance that turmoil will escalate and that no individual or group will gain a sufficient grip on power to bring order to the country.

Even if a regime acceptable to the Saudis emerges, it is unlikely that North Yemen's chronically factious, unstable political environment can be kept under control for more than several years. The lack of internal cohesion and meddling by South Yemen, the Saudis, and indirectly by the Soviet Union practically ensures regular leadership upheavals. Thus, the major concern for the United States is that it will be confronted by a nervous Saudi leadership, reacting to real or exaggerated threats to its security, which will judge US responses to calls for assistance as a major test of Washington's overall commitment to Saudi Arabia's security needs.

¹ Located in the southwest corner of the Arabian Peninsula, North Yemen comprises two distinct areas—the interior highlands and a coastal strip along the Red Sea. The present Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) encompasses most of historic North Yemen but has undelineated frontiers with Saudi Arabia and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). This Estimate uses the traditional geographically descriptive term North Yemen throughout.

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DISCUSSION

The Current Situation

1. Over the past year, President Salih's grip on power in North Yemen, never solid, has continued to slip badly. The National Democratic Front (NDF), an insurgency backed by the Marxist regime in South Yemen and the Soviet Union, has made significant military and political gains against Salih and now controls the southeastern portion of the country. Virtually all significant political groups in North Yemen are disillusioned with Salih's performance, and there is a strong possibility that he will be ousted some time within the year. To prop himself up, Salih has increasingly turned to the Soviet Union; he has received substantial arms aid and has probably asked for relief from NDF and South Yemeni pressures but has thus far resisted significant accommodations with Moscow. He is in sufficiently desperate straits at this point, however, that he may be willing to include a few Marxist ideologues from the NDF in his government in return for such relief. Saudi Arabia is deeply alarmed at this prospect and may look increasingly to the United States to help it respond to what most Saudi leaders believe could be a threat to their country's vital security interest.

US Interests

2. While the direct US stake in North Yemen is modest, the country could affect US interests in the security and energy posture of Saudi Arabia. Although developments in North Yemen do not pose an immediate threat to the Saudis, a hostile government there could draw on a million Yemenis living in Saudi Arabia to promote subversion. Prolonged civil strife, perhaps spilling across Saudi Arabia's southern border, could engage the Saudis in a debilitating effort to restore order—a task they are singularly ill equipped to perform. US steadfastness in helping Saudi Arabia deal with the North Yemen problem would be weighed heavily by Saudi leaders, who are already insecure over the strength of the US commitment to support their monarchy against external threats. A perceived failing on Washington's part to meet the Saudis' expectations could bring about a reconsider-

ation of their reliance on US support; more specifically, they might be more amenable to a policy of distancing themselves from the United States.

3. North Yemen is one of the states in which the Soviet Union is seeking to expand its influence in the strategically important Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf region. If Soviet strategy is successful, it will have increased its foothold on the Arabian Peninsula, enhancing its ability to subvert Saudi Arabia and neighboring Oman as well as being the predominant influence on both sides of the Red Sea at its southern terminus. The Soviets already have paramount influence in South Yemen and Ethiopia and are in an excellent position to exploit the current vulnerabilities of the Salih regime. The National Democratic Front is the selected instrument of the Soviets to subvert North Yemen and it is likely to remain a relatively disruptive force whether President Salih stays or goes.

Background

4. North Yemen—a resource-poor country—was untouched by the forces of modernization until a military coup in 1962 deposed the religious monarchy that had governed the country for nearly a century. Since that revolution, a succession of regimes has attempted—and failed—to substantially enhance central government control over competing tribal, religious, and political factions or to raise the standard of living.

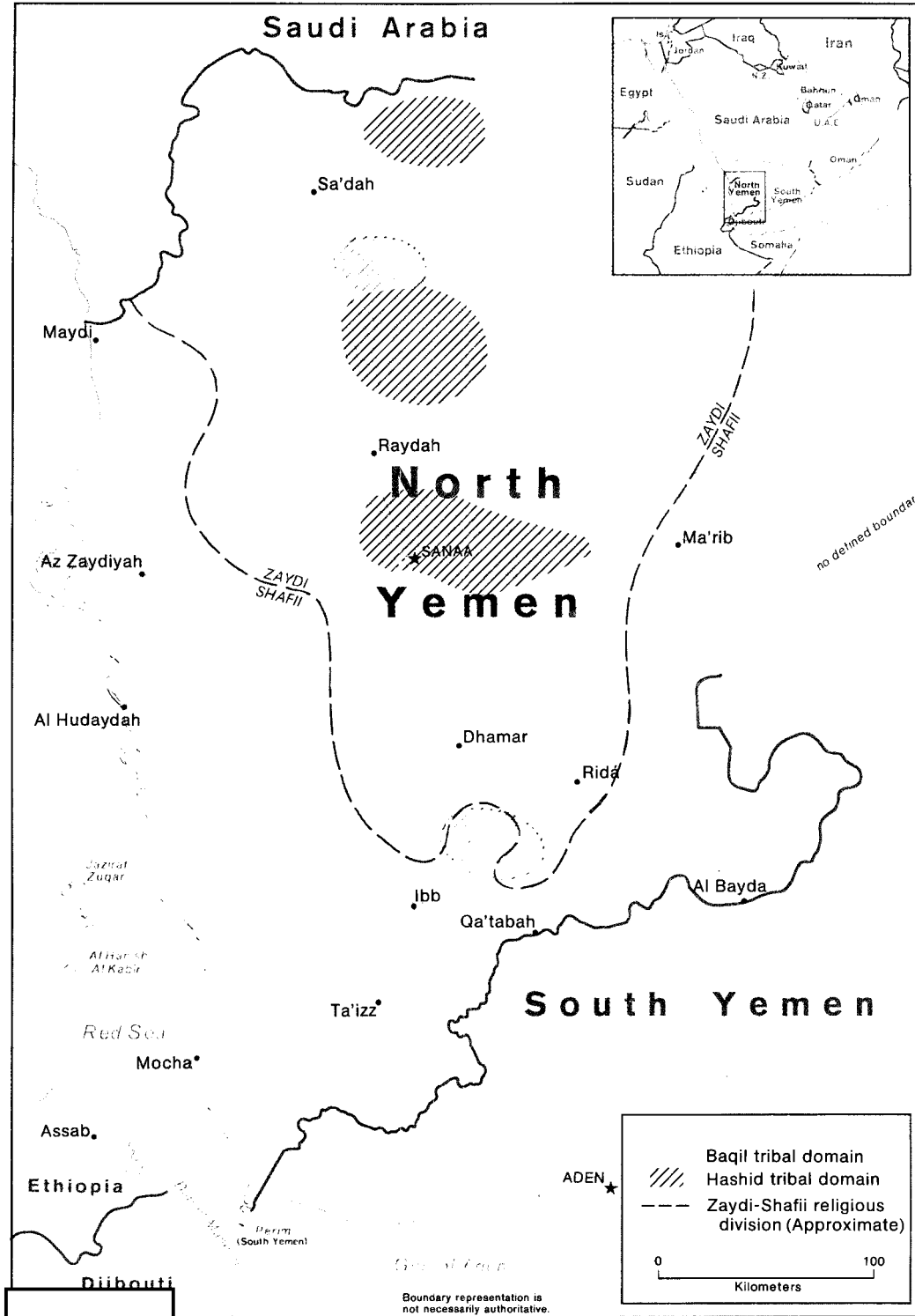
5. Geographic isolation and rugged mountain terrain have aided the perpetuation of social and political divisions. Two main tribal confederations—the Hashid and the Baqil—each subsume a multitude of tribes, clans, and families that continually build local alliances, sustain blood feuds, and endemically clash over such parochial issues as affronts to personal honor and land and water rights.

6. Religious divisions originating in early Islamic history evenly divide Zaydi (Shia) Muslims of the northern and central areas from Shafii (Sunni) Muslims along the Red Sea coast and in the south. (See figure 1.) The less tribal-minded Shafii farmers and traders have

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Figure 1
Religious Divisions and Selected Main Tribal Areas



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long resented Zaydi political domination of the government in Sanaa. Zaydi tribes have resisted by force the extension of government authority into their areas, even though fellow tribesmen have usually controlled the central government.

7. Additional political divisions emerged from the eight-year civil war that followed the overthrow of the monarchy. A variety of political groupings ranging from royalists to pro-Soviet Marxists have vied for influence in North Yemen's volatile politics.

8. The deep suspicion engendered by intense factionalism has impelled North Yemeni rulers to disregard the constitutional precepts and formal governmental structures created in the 1970s in favor of reliance on cliques of trusted personal associates and family members.

Domestic Political Forces

9. The central government has been plagued by chronic instability and assassinations of its leaders. In attempting to perpetuate their own survival, North Yemeni leaders have relied on strategies that emphasize playing off competing internal and external political forces. Over time, this usually has produced a further weakening of the President's fragile political base as his room for maneuver diminished. This is essentially what has happened to President Salih.

10. Some domestic power groups are sufficiently coherent to be able to place major constraints on the regime's decisionmaking. These forces—the military and security apparatus, the northern and central tribes, moderates, and the National Democratic Front—also are capable in their own way of promoting political change and shaping the character of the regime in a period of transition.

11. *The military and security forces*, although ineffective, are the strongest and most modern institution in the country. The president has generally come from the ranks of the military and relied upon the coercive power of the armed forces to intimidate political opponents and suppress dissent. Tribal, religious, and political cleavages in the military and security apparatus are tempered by a strong nationalistic fervor that significantly affects the character of Sanaa's foreign policy and diminishes the President's ability to forge durable alliances with foreign coun-

tries. Left-of-center nationalism is the predominant political viewpoint within the officer corps.

12. *Traditional tribal groups*—about 40 percent of the population—constitute the strongest political force in the northern and central regions of North Yemen and predominate in key government positions. The Hashid and Baqil sheikhs have made it their paramount political objective to limit leftist and Soviet influence in North Yemen through mobilizing large tribal armies, if necessary. Endemic tribal divisions, however, limit the potential for extended cooperation.

13. *Moderate North Yemeni nationalists*, who also oppose any leftward drift by the Salih regime, have been strengthened by the tribal distrust of Communist influence. The moderates generally believe that the economic progress of North Yemen depends on continued Saudi willingness to subsidize the country's various development projects. Moderate nationalists are scattered throughout the government and various branches of the military. The amount of power they wield has tended to fluctuate according to the political maneuverings of the president, the degree of organization they have been able to achieve, and the amount of coherent tribal support they have been able to muster.

14. *The National Democratic Front* is an insurgent movement that was officially established in January 1979. The NDF's Marxist-dominated leadership is directed by Aden and is dedicated to gaining control of the government in Sanaa, dissolving Western and Saudi influence in the Yemens, and eventually uniting North and South Yemen under a Marxist government. The Front operates mainly in the less populated and less-accessible southeastern areas of North Yemen. It has gradually expanded its de facto control in most rural areas in the southeast and created an embryonic cell structure in Sanaa and other cities. Although a shared Shafii identity with inhabitants of southern North Yemen has facilitated some NDF incursions, Shafiis in other areas have rejected Front emissaries and have actively opposed NDF advances. (See figure 2.)

15. The Front appears to be progressing toward its tactical goal of forcing the regime to relinquish several important cabinet posts to Front members. The NDF represents a loose amalgam of several dissident groups—Marxists, pro-Syrian Ba'thists, Nasserists, na-

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Figure 2
Areas of National Democratic Front (NDF) Activity



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tionalists, nonideologues, and supporters of former President Hamdi—many of which operated independently for several years before merging. External support for the Front derives primarily from South Yemen, although Libya and Syria have contributed a limited amount of weaponry and money. The Soviets also back the NDF, but have channeled assistance through Aden to obscure the extent and nature of their role.

External Involvement

16. The factious nature of North Yemeni politics affords considerable opportunities for foreign countries to exploit the vulnerabilities of rival political groups and the weaknesses of the regime. Traditionally, three external powers—Saudi Arabia, South Yemen, and the USSR—have sought to build influence in North Yemen and ensure that the regime followed policies supportive of their interests.

of military equipment to Sanaa by the United States and Saudi Arabia—Aden returned to its policy of subversion, leaving the NDF on the ground as its chosen instrument.

20. Since the border conflict, Sanaa has supported South Yemeni efforts to maintain a facade of good relations in an attempt to elicit Aden's willingness to limit support for the NDF. Although Sanaa's policy probably contributes to a lessening of tension along the border, it has proved wholly ineffective in curtailing the proliferation of new NDF enclaves and cells in various parts of the country.

Salih's Current Position

21. The current regime in Sanaa is led by Ali Abdullah Salih, a shrewd but unsophisticated politician of tribal mores, who came to power following the Aden-sponsored assassination of President Ghashmi in June 1978. A protege of his predecessor, Salih maneuvered his way to power by securing a series of assignments to key brigades in the military. In the immediate aftermath of Ghashmi's death, Salih exploited his new positions as Armed Forces Deputy Commander in Chief and Chief of Staff—as well as his pro-Saudi reputation—to gain support from the military and the tribes for his selection as President.

22. Since coming to power, President Salih has shown no signs of having a viable strategy for dealing with North Yemen's chronic domestic tensions and the countervailing pressures from Saudi Arabia and South Yemen, which plagued his predecessors. His lack of a clear vision for North Yemen, coupled with ruthless

moves to protect his leadership position, has badly damaged his original support in the military and among fellow northern tribesmen and dangerously reduced his room for maneuver. Salih's courting of the Soviet Union and simultaneous efforts to elicit greater financial and military assistance from Saudi Arabia have deeply alienated the Saudis, plunged the country into greater economic problems, eroded support among anti-Soviet tribes and technocrats, and only complicated efforts to withstand the most active challenger to his rule—the National Democratic Front.

23. Salih's inability to prevent recent territorial gains by the NDF has been the catalyst for the regime's current difficulties. After a brief respite in the Front's military activity in early spring—a period

19. A Marxist takeover in South Yemen in 1967, following a bitter four-year struggle against the British, ensured the creation of an ambitious regime committed to unifying the two Yemens under Marxist rule. After mounting an unsuccessful conventional military challenge to North Yemen in February-March 1979—which stimulated accelerated deliveries

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apparently used to reposition and resupply units and recruit from local tribes—the NDF initiated a number of clashes with government forces and local opponents in early June. The Front was able to significantly improve its positions and to claim with some credibility control over most of the southeastern portion of the country. Its greatest victory, however, was the impression of momentum and viability the string of successes seemed to create.

24. The next showdown between government forces and the NDF is likely to be in the area of Ibb—North Yemen's third largest governate and fifth largest city. The NDF has established positions on a ridgeline east of Ibb and has gained considerable political support among inhabitants of the city. The Front's guerrilla fighters are probably not prepared to attack and attempt to hold Ibb for any length of time. NDF leaders are more likely to undertake a limited drawn-out action designed to embarrass and debilitate government forces and enhance the NDF's image of having the upper hand in the south.

25. In countering this sort of challenge, Salih faces a difficult dilemma. North Yemeni troops have the capability of dislodging NDF guerrillas from urban areas such as Ibb, but an operation of this kind would require using units stationed near Sanaa which are commanded by Salih loyalists. A redeployment to the south could leave the President vulnerable to a coup attempt by disgruntled elements in the military or challenges by anti-Salih tribesmen from the north.

26. Salih seems to have no clear-cut plan for dealing with the NDF and, indeed, has few viable choices. Government forces are inadequately equipped and trained for counter guerrilla operations and are incapable of decisively defeating the NDF in the foreseeable future. North Yemen's terrain gives the guerrillas a great advantage as long as they continue to pursue their strategy of seeking only incremental territorial gains and gradually expanding their activity farther north and west. To this end, the NDF has developed a political and administrative apparatus in the areas under its occupation. Because these areas have never been under firm government control and have been largely neglected, the Front has found it relatively easy to entrench itself and recruit sympathizers through the financial assistance and services it extends.

At the same time, NDF leaders have repeatedly demanded that the Front be represented in the cabinet.

27. Salih has thus far refused such an accommodation, believing—with considerable justification—that it would only encourage additional NDF military advances, catalyze domestic antileftist forces against him, and propel a Saudi initiative to remove him. Salih may risk such a move if his position continues to deteriorate; however, it would be only another stopgap measure.

The Soviet Role

28. The Soviet Union's ability to influence events in North Yemen has increased since the conclusion of a major arms deal between the two governments in 1979. The Soviets' desire to consolidate their influence in North and South Yemen is based on the area's strategic location along the passageway between the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean, and its proximity to major shipping lanes of the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. Although South Yemen offers greater maritime assets, North Yemen provides a much more significant political lever on the major prize of the region, Saudi Arabia. Moscow's ultimate objective is to have a pro-Soviet government in North Yemen; at this juncture, it apparently believes that Salih's continued rule offers them the best opportunity for advancing this objective.

29. Salih's decision to resume North Yemen's arms supply relationship with the Soviet Union—which dates back to 1956—was originally conceived as a means for solving his political and economic problems. Salih felt he could no longer tolerate the leverage Saudi Arabia could exert on him as a result of its role as financier and dispenser of US military assistance to North Yemen. He also hoped to shock the Saudis with the Soviet arms deal and, thus, extract more aid from them. Moreover, he felt that an arms relationship with the Soviet Union would bolster military morale, consolidate military backing of his regime, and create incentives for the Soviets to reduce assistance to the NDF and restrain South Yemen's support of the guerrilla movement. On virtually all counts, Salih's calculation boomeranged.

30. He is dependent on Soviet supply of spare parts and advisory aid and is now deeply indebted to the Soviet Union, having made no headway in having

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payments of the \$700 million obligation canceled or rescheduled. The arms he has received—including MIG-21s, SU-20/22 fighter-bombers, T-54/55 tanks, and SA-2 and SA-7 air defense missiles—have only marginally improved the military's capability against the guerrilla fighters, and any initial boost to its morale has been seriously dampened by its poor performance in recent clashes with the NDF. Although Saudi support for Salih continues, Saudi leaders charged with managing relations with North Yemen appear to have given up hope that Salih is retrievable from Soviet influence.

31. The Soviets are in an excellent position to exploit Salih's current vulnerability. In exchange for debt relief, more arms, and counseling restraint on the NDF and South Yemen, they could pressure Salih to:

- Provide expanded naval facilities access at Al Hudaydah.
- Expand the 500-man Soviet contingent of military technicians and advisers already in North Yemen.
- Continue the purge of pro-Western figures from the government and the advancement of Soviet sympathizers in the military.

32. The Soviets might also revive their efforts to push Salih into accepting NDF representatives in his cabinet as long as such a move did not appear to threaten a total collapse of the regime. The Soviets presumably will try to balance these potential gains against the risk of pushing Salih into a bargain that would unleash anti-Soviet forces in the country, provoke Salih's ouster, or scuttle recent Soviet gains.

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Salih's Prospects

36. The steady deterioration of Salih's position and intensification of domestic unrest while he remains in power seem inevitable. The main power centers in North Yemen—the tribal confederations, the military, and political moderates—are either deeply disillusioned or opposed outright to the President. The leftists he has gathered around him are not personally committed to his survival and would take advantage of any vulnerability that advanced their cause. Salih's family and tribe—the only reliable protection he has against a coup attempt—may decide to abandon him, perhaps in favor of another clansman, in order to avoid a complete political debacle and gain safety from any future anti-Salih purge.

37. Salih has, by North Yemeni standards, proved to be an adept survivor and may take measures to sustain himself. He could, for example, write off the southern provinces to the NDF and concentrate on defending the central and northern portions of the country from guerrilla encroachment. This solution would bring

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only short-term relief, because most North Yemenis would not accept partition of the country. The chances of a successful military or Saudi-inspired coup would increase substantially.

38. Another option would be a definitive move toward the Soviet Union, involving a Moscow-arranged *modus vivendi* with the NDF and South Yemen. This arrangement would elicit a similar drive for Salih's removal and could protect Salih only if he were prepared to rule in a virtual state of siege.

39. The more likely eventuality is that Salih will simply try to muddle along as he has over the past year, losing political and military ground incrementally. He could be overthrown or assassinated at any time.

Implications of Salih's Remaining in Power

40. Salih's continuation in power is likely to serve the interests of the NDF leadership and South Yemen in the near term. The aim of removing Salih has been the adhesive holding the Front together. Most of the NDF rank and file do not adhere to the Marxist ideology of their leaders and have joined the movement because its organizational structure, access to weapons, and activism provide the best hope for removing the regime. The longer the anti-Salih banner holds the Front together the better chance the Marxist leadership has to convert its followers into committed members and to install a durable administrative structure in the areas under its control. Salih's precarious position, particularly his need to hold loyal forces in the Sanaa area, also offers the best possible conditions for the NDF to make gains on the ground. Moreover, if Salih in a desperate move invites Front members into the government, the NDF would be in a good position to bargain with a successor leadership if Salih should eventually be assassinated or ousted.

41. The NDF's South Yemeni backers almost certainly see the prolongation of Salih's shaky leadership as benefiting them. The NDF is their tool for gaining hegemony over North Yemen. They do not expect a "quick win" and are anxious to see the Front become a more cohesive, durable, and tractable political force. South Yemen does not want to be drawn into another indecisive conflict with the North such as it fought in 1979. North and South Yemeni forces are roughly equal in size and equipment strength, but South

Yemenis are considered militarily more capable. South Yemen probably wishes to avoid another attempt by the United States and Saudi Arabia to rescue North Yemen, and thus sees the success of the NDF as the safest means for advancing its interests.

42. The greatest danger in Salih's continuation in power—in addition to the gradual accretion of Marxist/leftist strength—is that it could lead to open and widespread civil strife. Disruption of that magnitude on its southern border is likely to trigger a panicky reaction among Saudi leaders and would almost certainly inspire them to call for US help. Geographic barriers, the buffer created by pro-Saudi northern tribes, and the fact that moderate leadership would have as good a chance as extremist elements for taking control will not calm their fears. Instead, they are likely to focus on the prospect of a united Yemen. In the event of significantly expanded hostilities the Saudis would view the US response as a critical indication of its security commitment to them.

Implications of Salih's Removal

43. It is far more likely that Salih will be removed from power before the situation in North Yemen devolves into widespread civil chaos. In the near term, such a move is most likely to come from the military. Many senior-level officers are deeply disturbed by Salih's inept handling of the struggle with the NDF and are bitter over his manipulation of officer appointments. Salih does not have sufficient stature among enlisted personnel to rally them against an officer-engineered coup.

44. A new military government probably would align itself with the non-Communist left and would be very similar to the present regime in its overall political tone. The officers corps of North Yemen is imbued with the ideology of the national revolution of 1962 and has a distinctly progressive caste to its political outlook. Most officers are opposed to what they perceive to be the reactionary obscurantism of most tribal and religious leaders. A successor military leadership would be as resistant to Saudi efforts to influence policy as Salih has been; however, the realities of North Yemen's economic needs would require some accommodations to Riyadh. If this entailed a Saudi request to dismantle the North Yemeni-Soviet arms relationship, the new government would

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face the same dilemma as the current regime and would probably swing toward the Soviet option. A successful military coup would probably require the cooperation of several key officers and might spawn a transitional command council.

45. In a military coup, military leaders probably would feel compelled to seek retribution for the embarrassments the armed forces have suffered at the hands of the Front. Demonstrating a capability to repulse NDF advances would virtually be a prerequisite for any new government seeking to establish its credibility and popular backing. Over time, however, a new military leadership might be amenable to some sort of accommodation with elements of the NDF, perhaps in the course of negotiations trying to co-opt non-Marxist individuals only nominally associated with the movement. The removal of Salih would in any case lessen the already loose ties holding the NDF together.

46. A successful move by Western-oriented, moderate politicians does not seem to be a strong possibility at the present time. Without an alliance with more powerful groups, these politicians are too weak to achieve an ouster of Salih and his loyalists in the armed forces. If they were to align themselves with disgruntled elements in the military, their prospects for having a significant voice in a new government are not good. Their other choice—seeking backing from Saudi Arabia and the northern tribes—would almost certainly cloud their nationalist credentials and would, in effect, burden them with the same onus of Saudi backing that Salih carried.

47. The northern tribes are threatening to move against Salih but, barring a dramatic act of Salih's intertribal competition and a lack of organization, will inhibit any coordinated effort on their part to unseat him. The paramount sheikhs will be courted by the various political factions in the immediate post-Salih era and they might even be able to prevent an individual from assuming power, but their role will be principally one of support or opposition to the fledgling government.

Overall Outlook

48. The prospects for a stable Yemen are not good in the near term. They might be somewhat improved if Salih was replaced by a nationalist military leadership that would be able to consolidate its position quickly. Deep-rooted factionalism and an impulse toward political violence will make it difficult for any leadership—regardless of its political coloration and external alignments—to build a durable powerbase or effective political institutions. A relatively rapid turnover of leadership with regular swings to the right and left of center is the most likely pattern of governance in the foreseeable future. As modernizing influence over time begins to blur the sharp differences between religious and tribal groupings, the possibilities for stronger central leadership will improve. In the meantime, internal frictions and the battle between Saudi Arabia and South Yemen for predominance over North Yemen will probably keep the country in periodic political turmoil.

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